

MRS. WILTON'S CHRISTMAS GIFT.

"Your Aunt Floy is dead; I do wonder if she made a will!" were the first words Mrs. Selma Gaylord uttered on reading the telegram telling of her sister's death. "It's a long way to California, and if she has given that girl everything I can not afford to make the trip." But she went, accompanied by her son, Lucius—"Lute," as he was called.

"She did die without a will," the lawyer of the deceased told her. "She had spoken about it several times of late, saying she wanted her daughter to have everything."

"Her daughter!" sneered Mrs. Gaylord, "she had none."

"Had none?" repeated the lawyer, "I do not understand; isn't Miss Rose—"

"No, sir, Rose is not her child, not even by adoption. She just took her."

Lawyer Rodgers looked incredulous, and half an hour later, when the lady had taken her leave, exceedingly disturbed. A full hour he and his son—and partner—Reece Rodgers, were closeted together that afternoon, and when the latter emerged from the conference he was pale and trembling. "Rose, my own darling!" he murmured, brokenly.

It was on Christmas morning, in the "land of the sunset," that beautiful Rose Wilton, standing beside the deathbed of Mrs. Gaylord's sister, had cried out in bitter grief:

"Mother, mother! speak to me! only speak to your Rose once more!"

Vainly the woman had essayed to speak or move; hand and tongue were paralyzed. Evidently there was something she much wished to say; and thus she died. In pitiful longing for sympathy, Rose Wilton turned to her aunt upon her arrival, but failed to find it.

Some business detained young Gaylord in San Francisco until his mother had been at the Villa—as the Wiltons' beautiful Oakland home was called—for three days. The morning after his arrival Mrs. Gaylord made much the same communication to Rose that she had the day before made to Lawyer Rodgers. The poor girl had fainted outright, rousing Lute to say something sharp to his mother about "cold-blooded heartlessness."

Upon regaining consciousness Rose locked herself in her room, and in the morning, when one of the old servants went to carry her some breakfast, he found her gone. There was a tiny, tear-stained note bidding them take possession. "The poor Norse outcast will never bother you again," it concluded.

Lute was furious. Already his infatuation for the lovely girl had determined him to win her and re-instate her in the house she had so long adorned. His remarks to his mother were not quite filial, and he immediately availed himself of every means of tracing the fugitive.

The news fell like a second thunderbolt upon her affianced husband, Reece Rodgers, and in consequence he fell ill of brain fever. As there seemed to be no will, the vast Wilton property passed into the hands of the courts, and Mrs. Gaylord returned home, stormily declaring that not one cent should ever go to her son if he found and married that "low creature." Meanwhile, Lute sought his fair cousin in city and hamlet with untiring, romantic ardor; but in vain. Three months elapsed, and completely discouraged, he was giving up the search, when a chance acquaintance told him of a young lady whom he had met at the home of a friend in San Francisco.

"She looks like the picture you have, and is teaching music to my friend's children," he said. Further, he agreed to introduce him at the house. It was all arranged that Lute should see the girl without being seen by her.

"She gives her name as Mary Wilson," the lady told him.

The moment his eye rested upon her he nodded to his hostess. "It is she," he whispered later, and when the young teacher arose from the piano she found herself face to face with young Gaylord. She knew him in an instant, and with a mocking bow swept past him. Not prepared for such a reception he stupidly let her pass, nor collected himself until it was too late to bar her way.

"When she comes next Friday you may have better success," said the lady, to whom he had frankly told the whole truth.

Anxiously he awaited the lesson hour on Friday morning. It came, but no music teacher, nor did she appear the next Tuesday.

"I must find her!" Lute declared, more determined than ever. He now made a business of walking the streets for many blocks around the house of his new acquaintance. He even called in the services of the

police to aid him. One morning one of the latter informed him he had seen a girl strongly resembling the photograph Gaylord had shown him, going in at the basement door of a residence on his beat. The next day he reported seeing her again and was sure it was the same face. Gaylord determined to call upon the lady of the house.

"Give my card to your mistress and tell her my business is important, and that I must see her if possible."

"He looks a gentleman, ma'am," the girl reported up stairs, and the lady sent word she would see him.

Briefly he explained his errand.

"I have a new girl in the kitchen—a very pretty one, too—but she calls herself Annie Johnson," the lady said, quite interested in the little romance. "I will have her come up," she added, and a few minutes later a portiere parted admitting a blushing damsel in brown gingham.

"Rose!" exclaimed Lute, impetuously, starting toward her.

The girl looked at him with great, wondering, blue eyes, a faint smile curving the full, red lips.

"My name is Annie Johnson, sir," she said, with the inimitable music in her voice that had charmed so many men in the Wilton parlors.

"Now, my dear cousin, don't try any subterfuges, please. I don't care by what name you call yourself, you are still my cousin, Rose Wilton," Gaylord said, earnestly.

"My name is not Wilton and I am not your cousin," retorted the girl, somewhat angrily.

"And remember, Rose," he went on, without noticing, "I have sought you every waking hour for over three months, now—ever since that dreadful night we found you gone. Wait," he added,

as she was about to speak. "My mother did wrong, I know it and have told her so; but never mind, now. Come with me and you shall be as my sister Ellice."

"But, sir, I don't understand you. I never saw you before and don't know what you mean about your mother, or my having left one morning."

"Don't know what I mean? Come, Rose, stop this dreadful jesting, or whatever it is, and let us be going. I can insure you a welcome in New York, or, if you prefer to stay in Oakland, the Villa is at your disposal."

"You have made a mistake, sir," persisted the girl, "you have mistaken me for some one else."

Gaylord paced the floor restlessly until he thought of the photograph in his pocket. Taking it out he handed it to the hostess, saying:

"Who do you think is right? Can I be mistaken?"

The lady glanced from the pictured face to the real one. "Annie, I am sure the gentleman is right; two persons could not so closely resemble; indeed, I am sure this is your photograph. If I were you I would own the truth and go with my cousin. You may have been

wronged, but you will repent a revenge that sentences you to a life of labor. Your hands show that you have worked hard since you left your home. See the picture for yourself."

The girl looked pale and frightened as she took the card in her toll-stained hand. Something in her attitude and manner at the moment sent a chill over the young man. "She may not be Rose; she doesn't act like her; but she looks like her; it must be," he said, in an undertone.

"It looks like I might look fixed up in that way," she said, simply, a bewildered look bringing shadows into the beautiful eyes.

"You acknowledge it, then; you will come with me?" he asked, eagerly, the doubt of a moment before vanishing.

"I don't know you, I can not go."

"No, you and I had not met for years until the evening before my mother's unfortunate communication; but I had never forgotten you. You do not doubt my identity, surely, when you recognized me so readily at Mrs. Lane's, less than a fortnight ago."

"Mrs. Lane's?"

"Yes, when you arose from the piano."

"Piano! Why, I never sat at a piano in my life. I can sing the songs my mother taught me, that is all."

"Rose! Rose!"

"My name is Annie, sir."

"Annie here and Mary Wilson at Mrs. Lane's!"

"Mrs. Lane again! Oh, dear!" and then the blue eyes overflowed and the poor girl rushed weeping from the room. Profound silence reigned for a full half minute after her departure, and then Lute asked, anxiously:



"WITH A MOCKING BOW SHE SWEEPED PAST HIM."